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FUNCTIONS OF A SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENT IN A STATE UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

1. *The Service of Sociology to the State.* 2. *How a Sociology Department in a State University Differs, or Should Differ, from Any Other Sociology Department.* 3. *More Descriptive Sociology Needed for the Advancement of the Science.* The value of sociology as a science will be enhanced by the working out of a larger number of intensive studies of particular communities, conditions, and problems. A state university sociology department owes it both to the science and to the state to make a real contribution toward the understanding of living conditions, racial problems, and class strife, within the borders of that state. Illustrative material for the regular undergraduate courses should be largely drawn from actual conditions within the state. The sociology department of a state university should be able to furnish authoritative information on conditions and problems of human relationships in that state. It is an unsatisfactory situation when an investigating governmental commission can get no assistance from the sociology department of the university of the state concerned. An appropriate function is the co-operating with other departments for the carrying on of a specific piece of research work. An example of this is the work of the Child Welfare Research Station at the State University of Iowa.

A state university exists primarily to serve the people of its state. By performing this service in an efficient manner it also serves the larger society, of which the state is a part. In these days of enlarging vision and growing problems, it is no time for any institution of higher learning to be self-centered or narrow in its outlook. This very breadth and tolerance can, in many cases, be best maintained and strengthened by a more intensive cultivation of a reasonably limited field. In both the study and the teaching of sociology is this particularly the case. There has been, and still is, too much of a tendency among certain of our sociologists to cover too much ground; to drift into social philosophy rather than stick to our plain, hard tasks of studying and interpreting the plain, hard facts of social relationships. The newness of our science perhaps makes some of this drift inevitable, or at least not unexpected. It is sometimes a line of least resistance to generalize upon insufficient data.

For reasons above stated, it is incumbent upon all of us who would advance sociology to the rank of a real science, to make whatever contribution we can to a systematic, detailed knowledge of the actual facts of human relationships. When we recall what an enormous amount of painstaking observation, study, and recording of the facts of plant and animal life has been necessary to build up the sciences of botany and zoölogy; and when we realize the great complexity of the subject-matter of our own science of sociology, we are made very humble at our scanty achievements. However, with the rapidly growing interest of many intelligent persons in the problems of human welfare, an increasing demand is laid upon all the social sciences. At best we shall accomplish little enough. Is it not high time, then, that our college and university departments of sociology take stock of themselves and see what can be done to improve the quality and increase the quantity of intelligent comprehension of social conditions and problems?

It is the deep conviction of the writer that, throughout the greater part of the United States, a large responsibility for leadership in this matter of clear thinking in the field of human relationships lies with the social science departments of our state universities. Nearly every one of these institutions serves a constituency large enough and varied enough in physical resources, in elements of the population, and in occupations of the people, to warrant an intensive study of this field which they may claim as their own. In some important respects, sociology departments in all standard colleges and universities have similar responsibilities, whether those institutions belong to the state, or have independent sources of income. The distinctive functions of a sociology department in a state university, however, are of sufficient importance to deserve consideration. Four of these will be discussed.

First, the fundamental obligation of every sociology department, under present conditions, is to provide sound, effective, well-organized undergraduate instruction. In the providing of this instruction, in the respective courses, the illustrative material should be drawn, as far as possible, from conditions within the state. Some courses will be more influenced by this principle than

others. For instance, the courses dealing with the abnormal classes of society should include a careful study of all state institutions caring for these particular classes. No major in sociology in a state university should be given his baccalaureate degree who does not have a fair working knowledge of all significant social agencies, institutions, and movements within that particular state. This standard is not reached at present in all cases.

Second, every sociology department in a state university should make a substantial contribution toward the training of professional social workers within that state. Making every practicable use of available facilities for laboratory work, the sociology department should be eager to give to selected and genuinely interested young people at least a preliminary training for effective social work. Undergraduate courses can rarely be made professional, with the best results; but during the Junior and Senior years considerable guidance and instruction can be given that will afford a sound basis for more distinctly professional work later. Also selected students can be encouraged to do real social work, under competent supervision, during the summer months. The writer has used this plan with success in two different instances. Progress City, Hiram House, Cleveland, and the 4-H Boys' and Girls' Clubs of West Virginia have been used as training laboratories for city and rural work respectively. These agencies and others like them are glad to co-operate with sociology departments in this respect. The process is of mutual benefit to the social agency and the university.

Every state has its own particular problems. To be sure, human nature is fundamentally the same everywhere; but it expresses itself in infinitely varied ways, due to infinite environmental variations. Why should the sociology department of every state university not take it upon itself to train workers (whether professional or lay) to deal intelligently with critical and complex social problems within the borders of that state? Even when workers so trained seek a larger field, the intensive study of the problems of one state, with a purpose of aiding in their solution, will always be of value to them.

Third, the sociology department of every state university should serve as a clearing-house of information concerning human relation-

ships, and conditions of living within that state. Both the citizens of the state itself and governmental or other agencies from outside the state have a right to expect accurate and impartial information on these subjects from the sociology department of the state university. Two instances will illustrate this point: (1) Why should a recent senatorial commission have been sent into a certain state to "investigate" conditions of living, and other problems concerning coal miners, and the department of economics and sociology of the state university not even be consulted on the matter? This senatorial commission, with its special and luxurious transportation facilities, its stenographic and other services, cost the American taxpayers several thousand dollars. The senators stayed in the state only a few days, picked up what information they could at random and went back to Washington. The money spent on this "investigation" would have brought more substantial results if it had been spent in thoroughly equipping, at the state university, the appropriate social science department that would constantly be at the service of the public for such needed work. But public opinion probably still favors dramatic, political methods of action, rather than more unassuming and scientific methods. A competent statistician and a trained social worker do not often "break into print." A Senatorial investigating commission can get on the front page of the newspaper most any day. (2) Why should a progressive and intelligent country newspaper editor write to his state university for information concerning the best way to go about a certain community activity, and find no one there who was sufficiently informed or interested to tell him any more than he knew himself? This was a recent occurrence in a Middle Western state.

Fourth, every sociology department in a state university should contribute to the advancement of sociology as a science, by doing some genuine research work. The nature and amount of research will depend upon the personnel of the department, its equipment, and the amount of time available for such work. Where a large amount of instructional and administrative work is required or expected of all the working force in the department, not much research work can be expected. For creative work, in the way of

statistical analysis, interpretation of results, and sustained logical thought, both time and energy are required, in rather liberal amounts. At present, the demands upon the instructional force in all departments of our state universities are so complex and constant, research work suffers. To be sure, an outstanding genius will break through all bonds, just as Abraham Lincoln could not be kept a rail-splitter all the days of his life. But just as all political leaders are not Lincolns, so are all sociologists not geniuses. Many there are, however, who, under more favorable circumstances, could and would make worth-while contributions to sociological science.

A state university that is adequately manned and equipped for research work in sociology should devote at least a part of its effort to developing the descriptive sociology of its own state. A worthy example of this is a recent publication *Rural Primary Groups*, by J. H. Kolb, of the University of Wisconsin. Mr. Kolb is connected with the "Rural Life Section" of the Department of Agricultural Economics, and has made a real contribution to rural sociology in this study of the social factors in a Wisconsin county. The University of North Carolina and Cornell University, as well as a few other state institutions, have done excellent work of this sort in the last few years. These are only beginnings of what should be a much larger development.

Race problems, housing and health in rural and mining communities, relations between city and rural people, and many other vital issues present themselves in one form or another, in many of our states. On all of them we need "more light and less heat" than we usually get, in their consideration, even by responsible citizens and public officials. Let our sociology departments in our state universities "kill two birds with one stone" by making a scientific problem of these definite issues, and by contributing toward their sane and satisfactory solution.

In a very excellent discussion of "Science and Sociology" in the *American Journal of Sociology* for November, 1921, Professor Hornell Hart, of the State University of Iowa, says:

Any procedure which adds accuracy, impartiality, and comprehensiveness to the processes of definition, classification, measurement, enumeration and correlation, promotes progress toward scientific methods. . . . No

insuperable difficulties prevent accurate definition of sociological items and variables. . . . Our failure to achieve results has been caused by the lack of objective means of measuring certain important variables, and the failure to apply and develop scientific methods of generalizing from social data. When these handicaps are overcome social science may be expected to produce improvements in human life far more revolutionary than those resulting from the application of experimental methods to physics, chemistry, and medicine.

If all of us, as sociologists, as teachers and students of sociology, would take to heart these wise and encouraging words of Professor Hart, we would make more rapid and substantial progress in the creation of a science which we believe to be supremely worth while, and which is advancing to higher standards in spite of a few jealous enemies and some unwise friends. The work of the Child Welfare Research Station at the State University of Iowa is an excellent example of how a sociology department can co-operate with *other* departments in carrying on a unique and valuable piece of research work.

The need for independent, high-grade thinking, unselfish devotion to truth and to the common welfare, was never greater than at the present time. A significant part of this need can be met by working out more definite standards of achievement in the social science departments of our state universities. If this discussion has made a contribution to that end, it has accomplished its purpose.